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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL ORGANIZATIONS ADDRESS STREET CHILDREN AND INCREASE IN PICKPOCKETING

1. (SBU) Summary: Pickpocketing incidents, particularly those involving cellular telephones, have risen sharply throughout Turkey in 2004, with the highest jump in Istanbul. National attention following an incident leading to the death of a student in Istanbul in November prompted the formation of a ministerial commission, increased security and greater punishments for pickpocketing. Government officials attribute the growth in pickpocketing to poor economic conditions leading to immigration from eastern and southeastern Turkey, and an increase in street children coming from broken families. Incidents continue, one resulting in the arrest in Istanbul of a group of youths from Diyarbakir in early December. State Minister Aksit predicted the number of street children in Istanbul could rise to 625,000. Istanbul security officials contend that they do not have sufficient funding to do more than arrest leaders of groups of child criminals. Organizations such as the Istanbul Social Services Directorate and NGOs addressing the street children issue contend that pickpocketing is related more to organized crime, and should be dealt with separately from the increase in street children. End summary.

Istanbul Pickpocketing Incident draws National Attention

2. (U) There were 11,886 pickpocketing incidents throughout Turkey in the first nine months of 2004, an increase of 23 per cent nation-wide, compared to 9700 in the first nine months of 2003. The incidents in Istanbul alone numbered 6000 in the first nine months of 2004, a 60 per cent increase over the comparable period in 2003. The death of a university student thrown from a train near Haydarpasha in November by a group of youths who stole the student's cellular phone drew national attention to the rise of pickpocketing and the related increase of street children. Three youths were arrested in connection with the death of the student, who was returning to his home in Istanbul via the express train after classes at a university in Izmit. The father of one of the youths arrested admitted that he forced his two middle-school aged children to work to contribute to the family budget, so his son started to sell pismaniye (a sweet special to Izmit) on the train, but he had fallen in with a bad group of friends.

3. (U) In response to public outcry after the incident, the Council of Ministers formed a commission consisting of four ministers (State Minister Aksit, Interior Minister Aksu, Education Minister Celik and Health Minister Akdogan) to research the causes of pickpocketing and the related issue of street children. After the first meeting of the commission, Aksit called the cause of the problem totally economic: 47 per cent came from the east and southeastern Anatolia; 42 per cent had left primary school; 49 per cent came from broken families; and 53 per cent had been exposed to violence. Deputy General Director of Security, Ramazan Er, who announced that additional police have been assigned to trains to curb pickpocketing incidents, echoed Aksit, attributing the cause to the immigration of families with many children from rural areas to large cities, along with the separation of the parents, who encourage their children to commit crimes. Er also announced that the punishment for these pickpocketing crimes would increase from three to seven years in the new Turkish Punishment Law coming into effect April 1, 2005. The Supreme Court also placed the crime of cellular telephone robberies within the category of extortion, and increased the punishment for those indicted of extortion from 10 to 20 years.

4. (U) According to the last census, Aksit announced that 625,000 children in Istanbul are at risk of becoming street children. Aksit added that 95 per cent of children working in the streets are male, and that the working children issue should be addressed separately from children living in the streets. Based on the Security Directorate's 2003 estimate of 88,313 street children addicted to drugs and involved with crime, Aksit noted that 15 per cent of these children are age 10 and under, and 85 per cent are between 11 and 18 years old. 44 per cent of these children are addicted to cigarettes and other substances, and of this 4 percent are addicted to alcohol, 2 per cent to paint thinner, 2 per cent to glue, and 2 per cent to narcotics.

5. (U) In November 2004, some Belgian tourists in Istanbul were injured by a group of young glue addicts in Cihangir

demanding money, and an Israeli tourist in Istanbul was also attacked by glue sniffers. The number of street children in Istanbul who are addicted to easily-obtainable inhalants such as glue and paint thinner is apparently increasing, and some may commit crimes such as pickpocketing on an individual basis. However, Istanbul Governorate social services and NGO officials believe that child glue addicts who commit crimes are generally not controlled by organized crime, as they do not produce a flow of money. These officials insist that the street children problem must be dealt with separately from the rise in pickpocketing, which is generally committed by professionals controlled by mafia groups.

Child Crime in Istanbul on the Rise...

16. (U) Statistics from the Istanbul Children's Crime division from January 1 - May 15, 2004 revealed that 5,569 children in Istanbul during that period were apprehended by police and accused of committing 4,285 different crimes. 4,740 of those apprehended were released by the court and returned to their families, 289 were sent back to their countries, and 395 were sent to prison. 192 were accused of pickpocketing theft; 310 of robbery, 546 of wounding others, 394 of fighting, and 131 of driving without a license. Interestingly, of the children aged 11 years and under accused of robbery, 191 were girls and 41 boys.

...but Limited Funds to Deal with Child Criminals

17. (SBU) Although National Security officials increased punishments for the crimes, limited financial resources for Istanbul security districts are preventing implementation of policies to address the increase in pickpocketing. Beyoglu Police Chief Gedik informed ARSO that he has stationed teams of plainclothes police officers and additional uniformed police in the Istiklal area to deal with increased crimes by gangs of children. Gedik had made a proposal to the Istanbul Chief of Police to develop a national program to deal with gangs of children who commit pickpocketing and other crimes, but was informed there were no funds for such a program. Gedik also said that beyond arresting and incarcerating several of the leaders of the gangs of street children, he did not have the authority or resources to combat the ongoing activities of the child criminals. Reacting to public pressure about pickpocketing and street children, Gedik began to round up children in his district and transfer them to the Beykoz district, the responsibility of the Jandarma, who Gedik is convinced have more resources to address the problem.

Amcit Pickpocketing incidents centered in Taksim

18. (U) Istanbul ACS unit advises that the locus of pickpocketing reported by American citizens has moved in 2004 from the tourist center of Sultan Ahmet to the business and nightclub area in Taksim -- in the Beyoglu district. However, there have thankfully been virtually no violent incidents involving Americans in Istanbul over the past two years in connection with pickpocketing.

Social Services and NGOs Address Street Children Problem

19. (SBU) While the government ministers and security officials are convinced that the increase in street children is a primary cause of the surge in pickpocketing incidents, both municipal government officials and NGO directors assert that the two issues are separate. Fevzi Yirtik, director of the Istanbul Governorate's Social Services Division, which operates eight shelters for street children in Istanbul, contends that most of the children in his shelters are not involved in crime, and that it is important to distinguish between street children and children involved in crimes such as pickpocketing. Yusuf Ahmet Kulca, Director of the Umut Cocuklar Dernegi (Association for Hope for Children), believes that the pickpocketers are controlled by different mafia groups, and attributes the rise in pickpocketing to the annual influx of approximately 300,000 immigrants from eastern and southeastern Turkey to Istanbul.

10. (SBU) Both the social services directorate and the NGO deal with children from broken homes, due to divorce, violence and abuse, and their goal is to reunite the children with their families. Pediatricians and other experts in both organizations work together to rehabilitate the children. The Social Services Directorate, which has addressed the problem of street children since 1998, deploys teams monitoring the streets to look for children who should be brought to the shelters, but will not do so by force. The governorate's 8 shelters have a capacity of 250, but currently there are approximately 150-200 children in the shelters, between the ages of 8 and 18, after which the state is not responsible. The shelters have an open-door policy for the children, so that they can come and go whenever they want. Yirtik claims his directorate has not had a problem with funding, and has been successful in reuniting one-third of the children with their families. However, as many

involved in pickpocketing incidents are between age 18 and 25, the social services directorate,s ability to reduce street crime for children over 18 is limited.

11. (SBU) The Hope for Children Association, one of 14 NGOs in Istanbul dealing with street children, works with children from age 7 to 27, 7 per cent of whom are girls. The Association,s single shelter in Bakirkoy has a capacity of 50, but currently is housing 35-40 children. The NGO has developed vocational projects to encourage children to stay off the streets, including working in a laundry service. The Association is supported only by private donations -- one of their facilities was donated by Philip Morris -- and depends on volunteers, including medical staff. Director Kulca complained that they have recently had to cut staff severely and cancel a project due to lack of funding.

12. (SBU) Comment: A continuing flow of immigrants from the east and insufficient funding handicap the ability of municipal, security and NGO organizations to deal with the growing numbers of street children and the increase in child crime. A city-wide effort to combat these problems, including greater cooperation between security officials and social organizations in Istanbul, is needed to reduce the increase in pickpocketing and the involvement of children in street crime.

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